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## The Four Myths

Gina Vega

*Many of the myths that have evolved from women's treatment in other areas have drifted inappropriately into the arena of business ownership and success. Results of a nonindustry-specific study of 367 U.S. entrepreneurs, coupled with qualitative analysis of ethnographic studies consisting of interviews, participant observations, and case studies, indicate that gender plays little or no role in entrepreneurial behavior. One significant area of gender difference was isolated—the perception of bias in the creation of their businesses by women entrepreneurs. There was no correlation between gender and dependent variables of financial measures, longevity of the business or age of the founder, general behavior towards employees and partners, personal or corporate mission, or exposure to networking opportunities.*

**D**uring the ten-year period 1985 to 1995, the U.S. job market experienced a significantly increased contribution from the small business sector.<sup>1</sup> This sector's growth has been attributed to numerous causes, among which are the loss of jobs due to downsizing, "rightsizing," and other corporate restructuring moves, a reaction to the big business abuses of the early and mid-1980s, global competition, and a desire for independence from corporate control. Constant announcements of projected layoffs of large numbers of workers signal the entry of additional cohorts of experienced, trained personnel into the entrepreneurial stream. A surging economy has limited the success of the individual within the larger corporate structure and encouraged new entrepreneurs to make their entrance into the world of small business.<sup>2</sup>

Coupled with this general trend to self-employment is the increased participation of women in the business world, as more and more women venture into entrepreneurial activity. Currently, women account for over thirty-six percent of American businessowners, and their businesses bring in annual revenues of \$2.28 trillion.<sup>3</sup> With a start-up rate four times that of men, Dun & Bradstreet estimates that women will own half of all U.S. businesses by the end of this decade.<sup>4</sup>

The article examines four myths women entrepreneurs have subscribed to that temper the success they have shown in starting and leading their own businesses.

### Gender Issues

While issues surrounding gender differences in the work-

place have been written about extensively in both the popular and academic press by many who claim that women behave differently from men because of their basic nature, their psychology, or the limits placed on them by society or the economy,<sup>5</sup> the mid-1990s have introduced a different claim. One study reports that tales of the problems women encounter in establishing and running a business are red herrings based on historical inequities, generally accepted attitudes, and the apparent lack of any other "better" explanation.<sup>6</sup> Citing Rutgers University assistant professor Patricia Greene, *Fortune* magazine reports, "Women entrepreneurs are even more like men entrepreneurs than they are like other women. They have faith in their ability to achieve and are confident enough to try."<sup>7</sup> This theme is echoed by Barbara Presley Noble: "... there is little substantial evidence that men and women are fundamentally different, even if it might seem so because of the different expectations placed upon them and the divergent courses their lives take."<sup>8</sup>

Five years later, battered and bruised, the debate continues in the popular press and among academics. In 1994, Tharenou, Latimer and Conroy claimed, "Women are at a disadvantage compared to men because of both the less positive impact of training on advancement and the less positive, indirect impact of work experience and education (through training). Women's advancement is furthered by the indirect impact of career encouragement (through training) but hindered indirectly by the negative impact of home roles on work experience."<sup>9</sup> *Fortune* reports:

Unlike the women of the class of '73, who by and large have remained full-time workers, many members of the class of '83 have left the preordained corporate path. A staggering 37% have started their own businesses. Almost 18% are working part-time, in many cases to spend more time with their families. Several others, including a number of successful single women, have stepped off the treadmill altogether in search of a calmer life. The theme for them all: That life comes down to a series of tradeoffs—not a word in their vocabulary 15 years ago—between career, relationship, and children; sometimes, they learned, you must pick one or two out of three.<sup>10</sup>

Caputo and Dolinsky discuss the impact that husbands have on women's employment and their entrepreneurial behavior, noting that limitations created by the need for childcare and other household-related demands establish

significant impacts on entrepreneurial success.<sup>11</sup>

Although many analysts avoid discussing gender by describing the prototypical entrepreneur as someone who has an idea and who is willing to take a risk,<sup>12</sup> for others, the prototypical entrepreneur is male and, therefore, exhibits "masculine" characteristics such as independence, persistence, energy, self-confidence, and decisiveness.<sup>13</sup> Cultural anthropologist Geert Hofstede has been writing for more than thirty years about cultural dimensions on which to measure national differences. Hofstede describes the United States as a "masculine" society, based on his series of accepted criteria,<sup>14</sup> thus reinforcing the stereotype. Being a masculine society suggests that women encounter roadblocks to success in the workplace, such as the necessity to maintain primary responsibility in the home as well as fulfilling outside work responsibilities. Feminine society suggests that women have equal opportunity in the workplace, and men share fully in home maintenance responsibilities. Feminine characteristics in Hofstede's model include collaborative decision making, stress on quality of life issues, and conflict resolution through compromise and negotiation. Masculine characteristics include management through decision and assertive action, competition, and conflict resolution through fighting and shows of strength.

Comprehensive research on women businessowners that appeared at the same time as Hofstede's update indicated that the most significant differences between men and women entrepreneurs relate to social orientation more than other areas of comparison.<sup>15</sup> The social relationships that are so meaningful to women (family, community, and business) become integrated into the individual's life. However, when men start businesses, they focus less on relationships than on financial performance, timing, and work experience.

The unfortunate early insistence on the male/female dichotomy of personality traits has inhibited the objective study of U.S. entrepreneurial behavior and permeates the literature.<sup>16</sup> Much of this emphasis is the result of years of study and analysis of women in management and the transference of assumptions from general management to entrepreneurship.<sup>17</sup> Very few studies have been conducted that include significant numbers of women entrepreneurs and their businesses,<sup>18</sup> although more interest is being focused on this topic. *Fortune* dedicates space to women and their achievements in the business world annually. In 1998, the magazine gave the fifty most powerful women in American business their cover and considerable pages within the magazine, some of which were devoted to women in the Harvard Business School class of 1983.<sup>19</sup> Several of these accomplished women have become high-profile entrepreneurs, which may lead many to believe that these occurrences are both frequent and common. Data derived from the current study supports that claim, with the exception of four "myths" that arise from the perception of bias against

women. This perception is held by thirty-seven percent of the women respondents, and is the only significant difference in the behavior of the men and women in this study. The perception of bias in the founding or building of their companies arises from four beliefs held by the women:

1. Being a woman is a disadvantage in networking.
2. Men refuse to "work" with women.
3. Women are not "taken seriously."
4. Women cannot get government or private (commercial) loans as easily as men.

## Methodology

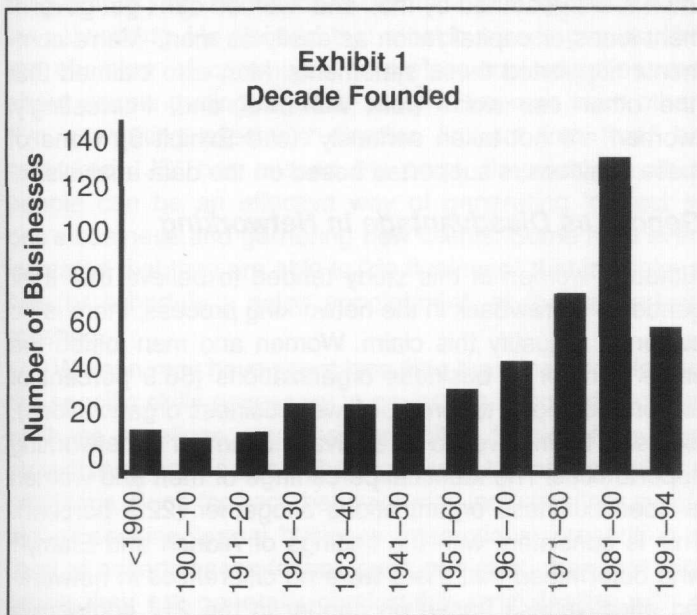
A four-page questionnaire regarding business creation and practices was sent to the 1994 subscriber base of *Small Business Reports*, a monthly magazine for "small and mid-size business decision-makers," published by the American Management Association. A cover letter requested that only owners/founders respond, thus limiting the response to 5.9 percent (the subscriber list held 7,613 names). The survey sought broad information about corporate history, industry, and major function, as well as specific data about composition and structure of management and employee base, business planning, the condition of employee morale, the mission and success based on stated mission/goals, and plans for the future—succession and economic.

The responses of 367 owners of businesses having fewer than 100 employees (eighty-three respondents were eliminated because they employed more than 100 people) were analyzed using qualitative and ethnographic measures, triangulated with quantitative measurements in a process supported by previous researchers.<sup>20</sup> The group was geographically diverse, representing forty-five states, Puerto Rico, Guam, Canada, and Mexico. Men are overrepresented in the study due either to self-selection or demographics of the overall list (seventy-six percent men, seventeen percent women, seven percent unidentified).

Structured interviews and two-day site visits were conducted with four owners selected from among volunteers in the larger study to reflect diversity of industry, size, gender of owner/manager (two were men, two were run by male/female teams), and geographic availability. The naturalistic observations of their organizations yielded an abundance of qualitative data. An additional structured interview was conducted with a woman owner in a more distant location, but time constraints prohibited the two-day site visit. These interviews and observations were augmented by participant observation activities in several business and networking groups over a period of sixteen months. The researcher played an active role in three networking organizations, and participants were made aware of her research interest at regular intervals. In all, more than fifty entrepreneurs were interviewed in a nonstructured format and another dozen more formally, in addition to the five men-

tioned above. Interviews related to issues of start-up (when applicable), daily management, planning, networking, and

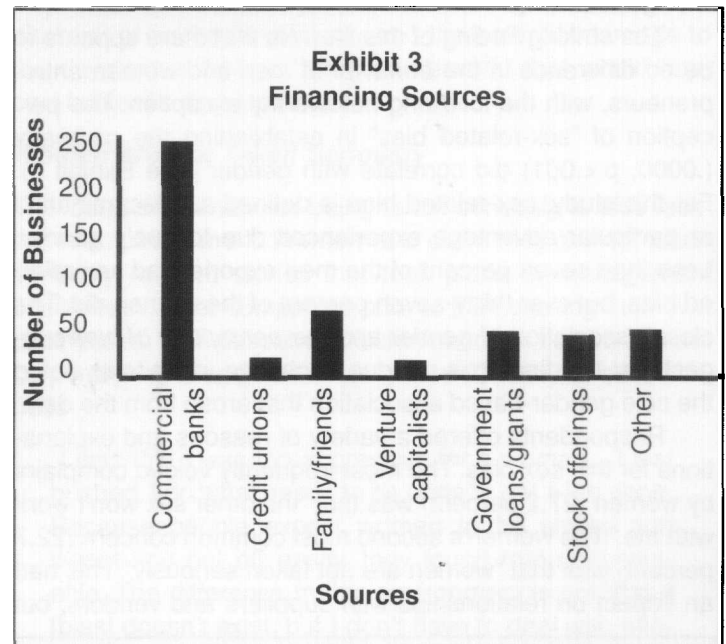
founder (Exhibit 2), sales volume, earnings, perception of fiscal health—none of these quantifiable measures were dif-



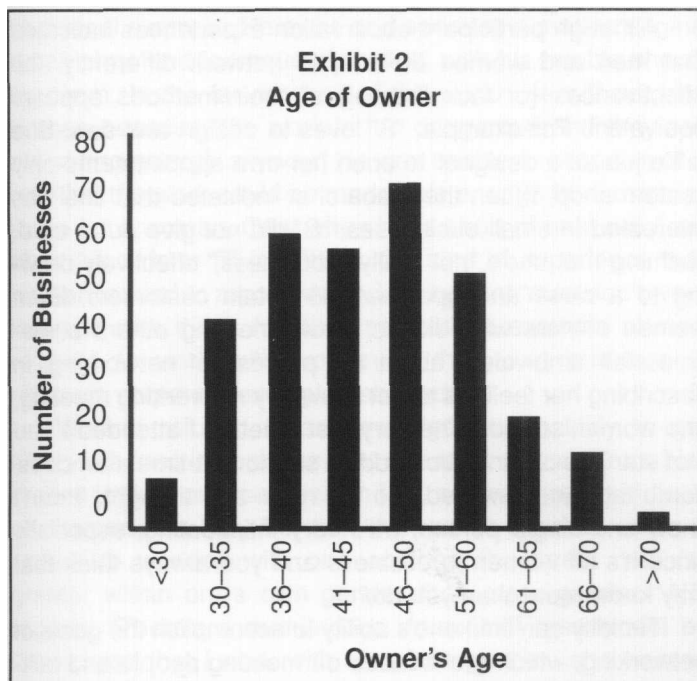
other relationship-oriented topics. All formal interviews were taped and conducted at the entrepreneurs' place of business.

### Findings

Tests for association among individual variables, sets of variables and gender of the owner/founder (from the survey questionnaire results) uncovered a notable lack of gender-based relationships. No correlation appeared between gender and the dependent variables. The amount of start-up funds, longevity of the business (Exhibit 1), age of the



ferentiated by gender. The qualitative measures provided virtually the same result. Type of mission, the existence of and the owner's dependence on a business plan, the reason the owner stays in business, use of various types of motivators, method of establishing prices for products/services, ability to obtain financing from various sources (Exhibit 3), amount of participatory decision making, hiring procedures,



**Exhibit 4**  
**Chi-Square (Bias by Gender)**

		Gender		
		Male	Female	
Bias	Count	18	23	
	Exp Val	33.4	7.6	
	Row Pct	43.9%	56.18%	
	Col Pct	6.8%	37.7%	
Bias	Tot Pct	5.5%	7.0%	
	Count	248	38	286
	Exp Val	232.6	53.4	286
	Row Pct	86.7%	13.3%	100.0%
Bias	Col Pct	93.2%	62.3%	
	Tot Pct	75.8%	11.6%	
Column Total		266	61	327
		81.3%	18.7%	
Chi-Square	Value	43.31057	1	.00000
Pearson	Significance			

personnel practices, exposure to networking opportunities, and organizational participation all denied any association with gender.

The striking finding of this study is that there appears to be no difference in the *behavior* of men and women entrepreneurs, with the following noteworthy exception. The perception of "sex-related bias" in establishing the company (.0000,  $p < .001$ ) did correlate with gender (see Exhibit 4). For this study, sex-related bias is defined as discrimination or particular advantage experienced due to one's gender. Less than seven percent of the men experienced sex-related bias, but over thirty-seven percent of the women did. The close association of gender and the *perception of bias* suggest that this finding is not due to chance, despite its being the sole gender-based association that arose from the data.

Respondents offered a variety of reasons and explanations for this sex bias. The most frequently voiced complaint by women (27.2 percent) was that "the other sex won't work with me." The women's second most common concern (22.7 percent) was that "women are not taken seriously." This had an impact on relationships with suppliers and vendors, but

not with customers. The range of issues cited by women included "being female is a disadvantage with networking," "men feel threatened by me," and "women can't get government loans or capitalization as easily as men." Men's comments supported these statements. Men also claimed that "the other sex won't work with me" and, interestingly, "women are not taken seriously" (see Exhibit 5). None of these positions is supported based on the data analysis.

### **Gender as Disadvantage in Networking**

Although women in this study tended to believe that their gender is a drawback in the networking process, there is no evidence to justify this claim. Women and men joined the same number of business organizations (56.9 percent of owners belonged to three or fewer business organizations), exposing themselves to an equivalent number of networking opportunities. The identical percentage of men and women avoided business organizations altogether (22.9 percent). This is consistent with the findings of Aldrich and Elam,<sup>21</sup> who determined that there were no differences in networking effectiveness based on gender in the 217 companies they studied.

Commonly, both men and women entrepreneurs had poor networking skills or deliberately avoided networking opportunities, defined as meetings of professional societies, chambers of commerce, and local business groups as well as shared-interest groups at which business contacts might be made (religious, social, educational, or community-based). Networking skills include the ability to conduct business "small talk," introduce topics that permit the highlighting of one's expertise, a high comfort level with meeting and talking to strangers about a variety of topics, and the ability to listen and respond to others' needs and interests.

Although participant observation experiences indicated that men and women do tend to network differently, the effectiveness (or lack thereof) of their methods appears equivalent. For example, "S" loves to design and sew. She left a job as a designer to open her own appointments-only custom shop. When the researcher indicated that she was interested in small businesses, "S" did not give out a card, claiming that she's "not really a business," effectively drawing to a close an opportunity to obtain customers. Even women owners who did not avoid meeting others sometimes felt ambivalent about the process of networking. In describing her feelings about a low-key networking meeting, one woman stated, "The very first meeting I attended I had that star [the organization adds a star to first-time attendees' name tag] and I walked into the room and thought, 'I don't know one single person.'...It's very intimidating, especially since it's all women in business and you always think that they know more than you do."

Timidity can limit one's ability to accomplish the goals of networking, which are focused on meeting people and talk-

**Exhibit 5**  
**Descriptions of Sex-Related Bias**  
**by Those Who Claimed Bias**

<b>Descriptions</b>	<b>% of Claimants</b>
Other sex will not work with me	22.5
Women are not taken seriously	20.0
Other sex filed grievance	12.5
Sex is a disadvantage with networking, advancement	10.0
Women cannot get government loans or other funding	5.0
Harassment	5.0
Other sex feels threatened	5.0
Business perceived as smaller than it is due to gender	2.5
Men get more attention; women treated like assistants	2.5
Women are too "sensitive"	2.5
Required to support other sex in performance ability	2.5
Women have to break ground constantly	2.5
Women are better workers	2.5
Other	5.0
<b>Total</b>	<b>100%</b>

ing about one's business, but timidity is not limited to women. "JS," the founder of a two-site employee-assisted program serving thousands of clients, avoided opportunities for networking. He claimed that most business groups, like the chamber of commerce or professional societies, are about people getting together to try to impress each other. "I'm a working executive director. I'm not into that," he remarked. "JS" has missed the point. "Impressing" other people can be an effective way of generating interest in one's business and garnering new clients. Some men even indicated that they are able to "do business," that is, make a sale or schedule a sales appointment, at the networking meeting.

Women may have spent less time than men developing the specific skills necessary to project an image of success at these meetings, and they are often fighting their own stereotyped beliefs about the "right" way to behave in these situations. Such "correct" behavior may include either avoiding or seeking formal business interactions, presenting a level of assertiveness (either lower or higher) than that with which they are generally comfortable, and dealing with a basic uncertainty avoidance that differs from the majority of those present at the meeting. Individuals may reduce or raise their level of activity in each particular behavior, but their discomfort level may preclude their feeling successful at these meetings.<sup>22</sup>

### **Men's Unwillingness to Work with Women**

There is no reason to assume that men are unwilling to work with women. The issue of men not working with women appears to have its provenance in the trades and other traditionally male-dominated professions, but does not appear to have extended to business in general. Fred provides a traditional example. He owns and operates a marine engine repair shop and is frequently called, with his trouble-shooting team, to the far reaches of the world. He will not hire women because "the work is too dangerous and they are not strong enough anyway." He was unable to conceive of a way that the work could be made safe enough for a man, let alone for a woman. Only when he is short of men will Fred allow his wife to fill in. This is the kind of experience that women tended to report when claiming that "men don't want to work" with them. No one reported an example of men refusing to work with women in their own businesses, although corporate examples abounded.

Women refused to acknowledge any inability to get along with men in business or to see male attitudes as a hindrance to their own success. In fact, several women indicated that women may be their own worst enemies when it comes to working with one another; the threat may be greater within one's own gender than cross-gender. "AK" reports, "There's a tremendous amount of resentment by the women that I work with based on gender...she wanted

me to come down on my fee...she wanted to show that she could get something for the company...she fought me all the way." This same tendency has been noted by others,<sup>23</sup> to the discredit of women's solidarity and the potential damage to the development of an "old-girls' network" that would support business development.

### **Women Are Not Taken Seriously**

The issue of women not being taken seriously is also lacking in empirical merit. Women who claim they are not taken seriously recount stories that took place in management positions in larger companies prior to their starting their own businesses. "CV" described discrimination in her work in the corporate world and how it has followed her to her own business.

I was told I was too aggressive for a woman... I just pushed. I do what needs to be done to get a job done. Because people expect women to be smiley and sweet and put off easily, they found that unacceptable. The difference in this environment is not that it [bias] doesn't exist, but I don't have to deal with people who insist on working that way whereas in the corporate world I had to go into the office the next day and be a team player and make believe nothing happened.

This apparent expectation of women's having to be "smiley" irritates some entrepreneurs greatly. "AK," for instance, sent back several radio ads until the copywriters "came up with a very good idea that I thought I could live with. I didn't want the ad to be cutesy; I wanted it to be serious. One of the reasons was because I'm a woman and I was very adamant about it. I didn't want to go into an office and find it's cute because 'she's a woman'." Stories like these reflect back more to the corporate research performed by others<sup>24</sup> than the realities of entrepreneurial life.

No single case was reported by a woman of not being taken seriously *in her own company* that was also not tied to age. The younger the woman, the more likely she was to experience this phenomenon. This is not surprising, as most people tend to link age with experience and experience with credibility.<sup>25</sup> The oldest woman to make this complaint was thirty-three years old, and she was almost defensive about not having experienced gender bias, only age bias. "IB" maintains, "I think about this all the time...I can see it in the person's face. They'll like make a little gasp. Sometimes people say, 'What are you going to teach me? Men usually say that.'"

### **Obtaining Capital**

The difficulty of getting business funding, especially for companies younger than three years old, is a familiar problem.



Both women and men believe that it is harder for them than for others to obtain funding. Men believe it is harder for them because they are not women and "women get all the breaks." Women, on the other hand, feel it is harder for them because they are not men and "men get all the breaks."

This myth does contain a grain of truth. Women without a university education are less likely to receive start-up funding from commercial sources than were men without a university education.<sup>26</sup> However, when men and women both have a university education, this disparity in loan receipt disappears. The real key here is the concept of "start-up" funds, not money for expansion or other purposes in established firms. When factors of firm age, size, industry, growth, and structure are constant, gender-related differences in loans can be accounted for solely by the individual characteristics of the companies involved.<sup>27</sup>

In this study, men and women had an even chance of getting funding. Statistically, 64.6 percent of respondents sought and obtained funding from banks. This was true across gender, as was access to all sources of financing, including family contacts. The perception of bias seems to have become the reality for some entrepreneurs who perhaps were not good credit risks or who were unable to

obtain funding for other reasons.

## Conclusions

Men and women succeed or fail in their bids for entrepreneurial achievement based on individual characteristics, environmental factors, and their ability to adapt to the needs of their specific industries. It is only in the area of bias encountered in building one's business that gender becomes a mitigating factor.

Despite the ease of refutation of these four myths, it appears that a significant percentage of women (thirty-seven percent in this study) are willing to accept beliefs carried from other social or business arenas to that of business ownership. Self-reporting thus appears to become an inaccurate and inadequate means of determining bias.

As more women enter the ranks of entrepreneurs, longitudinal research will become easier to conduct. Whether women or men are studied, the opportunity to track and observe changes in business ownership over the long term will help to clarify the "why" of entrepreneurship and lead to further understanding of the nature of the entrepreneurial phenomenon.

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